

Food: What Students Really Want

Results in from latest dining survey

By Susan Seligson



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This just in: burritos are the new pizza, the BU Platter rules, the George Sherman Union Food Court could use a Taco Bell, and lines are too long at Warren Towers. All of this is revealed in the annual BU Dining Survey, along with a heaping portion of students' food preferences, peeves, and dining behavior.

How do you feed 16,295 active people day in and day out, satisfying tastes ranging from mac 'n cheese to tempeh curry, with as few blunders as possible? On the Charles River Campus, the task falls to the staff of Auxiliary Services and Dining Services. Students may grouse about sodden pasta or crawling sandwich lines, but at least once a year the management listens and takes heed. After the crunching of numbers, the 33-question anonymous Student Dining Satisfaction Survey is the voice that asks for more soups, more sustainability, and later hours. The survey results can put the kibosh on a GSU franchise (so long, Ben & Jerry's) or persuade the powers that be to abandon their effort to take the hallowed BU Platter upscale. It's a chorus of praise (for variety and freshness) and complaint (about peak-hour shortages and some outmoded facilities).

Overall, though, the survey reflects a high rate of satisfaction, says Webb Lancaster, director of operations for Auxiliary Services. This year, almost three out of four students said that Dining

Services provided a “good to excellent dining experience.” And things seem to be getting better. Students rated their overall dining experience 11 percent higher than in the 2008 survey, and ratings for food variety soared nearly 31 percent. Highest marks went to the Fresh Food Company at West Campus, followed by Warren Towers and Towers, with the older, smaller dining rooms at Myles Standish and Shelton Halls predictably trailing in favorability.

With more than 6,000 respondents this past fall — an increase of about 3,000 over 2008 — the online survey is the most important planning tool for an operation that covers not just residence hall dining rooms, but dorm-based retailers and franchises at the GSU Food Court. Craig Hill, associate vice president for Auxiliary Services, says administrators share survey results with each campus food service director and work with them to forge “action plans.” When there’s a change inspired by the survey, students get the details from a series of “We Heard You” posters. Barbara Laverdiere, Dining Services head of marketing, says those changes are driven mainly by the data, but also by comments on the survey form. “We read every comment,” she says.

Hill and Lancaster, along with dining services directors Laverdiere and Scott Rosario, director of marketing, have been chewing over results of the most recent survey, and they were surprised at some findings. Considering how difficult it can be for a family of five to agree on what to eat, BU is mostly successful at pleasing palates bland and sophisticated. If on-campus students are what they eat, they are part-Mexican, part-Italian, and large part BU Platter. There are gender differences: campus women like more bagels than men do, but men edge out women when it comes to Rhett’s burgers and Panda Express. Four times more women than men drink tea. And students hone their preferences over time: freshmen flock to Starbucks, while Dunkin’ Donuts’ wide appeal holds steady through graduation. Foreign students love the create-your-own grilled cheese bar and Warren Towers’ burger blowout.

Here’s a dietary snapshot of students living on campus: nearly 9 percent are vegetarian. Of the 15 percent who have food allergies, dairy allergies are most common, followed by allergies to nuts, fish, gluten, soy, and eggs. The Fresh Food Company gets a 52 percent in student popularity, 25 percent favor Warren Towers, and the remainder are loyal in equal measure to old-timers Myles Standish and Shelton. Of all five residence dining halls, Warren Towers was cited most often (by 27.2 percent of respondents) as needing “to improve its overall dining experience.” The reasons include: the quality is lower because the food is mass-produced, there are too few meal choices, the food often runs out, and the lines are too long, especially at peak hours. But Warren may be a victim of its own success: it’s a favorite of Bay State Road residents, and it draws defectors from Shelton and Myles.

While nearly 70 percent of students gave high ratings (“5” or above, with “1” poor and “7” excellent) to their overall dining experience, they were slightly less enthusiastic about food taste (about 62 percent) and appearance (60 percent) and about half gave highest marks for food variety. Dining Services’ convenience was praised by 77 percent and nearly three quarters say they are very pleased with staff friendliness and appearance and cleanliness of the service area.

What do students really want when choosing a place to grab a meal or snack on Comm Ave? Food quality, convenience, cleanliness, and “overall experience” top the list — no surprise there — but nearly 80 percent of survey respondents also place a high level of importance on staff

appearance and food temperature, both of which are slightly more important than speed of service, food freshness, and food variety. As for the ever-evolving offerings at the Union Food Court, 15.7 percent of those surveyed said they wouldn't mind if Cranberry Farms were replaced with something else, 17.6 percent would be fine saying adios to Caprito Burrito, and 14.2 percent could say arrivederci to Amalfi Oven with no regrets. Copper Kettle and Sushi Bar were deemed expendable by around 12 percent.

The survey showed strong student support for stepping up recycling and sustainability efforts, including starting a compost pile, adding sorted recycling bins, limiting paper napkin use, offering a choice of dishes or paper plates for late night. Laverdiere says there was some grumbling when Dining Services dispensed with trays in September 2008, but students quickly got over it, and the University is now saving water and cutting food waste.

Hill says BU tries to fit its food offerings to a range of lifestyles, and it seems to be succeeding, with flexible meal plans and ethnic specials at dining halls. When it comes to special diets, 87 percent of students say they have no restrictions, vegans comprise only 1.1 percent, and vegetarians make up around 10 percent. But, says Hill, 70 percent of campus menu offerings are vegetarian by default.

While using surveys to determine the future of dining choices is generally reliable, Hill points out that it is not foolproof. One memorable misstep was a Ben & Jerry's franchise, which appeared on the wish lists of large numbers of students.

"When we put it at the GSU, everyone was talking about it," says Hill, "but the sales just didn't hold up." The ice cream vendor was replaced by Jamba Juice, a West Coast franchise that had gotten much less support on the survey. The result? Students loved it.